
Comdt. John James Kelly, I.R.A.

URNEY, STRABANE

Killed by a Bomb Explosion near Castlefin in November 1938

1890

When youth's young
blood coursed through
my veins,
I pledged my love to
you, dear land,

1938

I'd be thy slave while
life remains,
Through Summer's
beams or Winter's storm,
Until your fight was won.



“Your life one long attempt to free
Your land and class from slavery,
Unconquered Gael, your race is run,
Your watch upon the hills is done,
The Drumboe Martyrs rush to greet
The Connolly of Clady's Street.

Memorial to be unveiled on Sunday 14th September 1969

SEAN SEAMUS O'CELLAIGH

On the 28th November 1938 an accidental explosion caused the death of three men at Stranamuck, near Castlefin, Co. Donegal. They were Comdt. John James Kelly, Comdt. Charles McCafferty and Staff Captain James Joseph Reynolds. Kelly and Reynolds were killed instantly and McCafferty lingered for a few days and died in Lifford Hospital.

Plans had been made for the demolition of the customs huts at Clady and Strabane. The three men met at the house of Patrick Kelly, brother of John James; they were in a room at the rear of the house when the explosion which blew away part of the roof and walls, occurred. The exact cause of the premature explosion has not been known. An account given by Patrick Kelly states, that the men discovered that the timing of the explosion would coincide with the return home of Lifford people from the pictures in Strabane. They decided to change the timing device and in doing so caused the explosion. This regard for the lives of innocent people resulted in the loss of their own.

John James Kelly was born in the Rawes, near Castlefin in the historic Finn Valley, on the 19th June 1890, and received his education at Castlefin National School. He was brought up in the Fenian tradition, his father, Hugh Kelly, having been a Fenian.

John James had an intense passion for reading, especially Irish History, and loved to quote James Fintan Lawlor. He was a humourous character, of medium height and build, and a fine military appearance.

Comdt. Kelly was recruited to the I.R.B. at an early age, and he helped to organise the National Volunteers in Clady. After the split in the Volunteer movement he took the side of the Irish Volunteers. He formed a group in Clady and became Company Captain. He took part in many raids for arms in Tyrone and Donegal. In 1917 he was in an arms raid on Baronscourt, near Newtownstewart and on the 29th August 1920 he was in the attack on Drumquin Police Barracks, in which a policeman was shot. Such an active man could not escape the eye of the police, and in December 1920, he was arrested and interned in Ballykinlar until the 9th December 1921.

Like many other Republicans released from English prisons at that time, John James Kelly did not return home to a country of peace and happiness. There was much opposition to the Treaty which had been signed with England, and that opposition grew as the year 1922 advanced. Comdt.

Kelly resumed his old position as O/C. of the Clady Company of the I.R.A. and became active in training and re-organising. He took part in the Clady Ambush which was to become famous by song.

History took a sad turn of events and Republicans were attacked, not by Crown Forces, but by former comrades acting in the name of an Irish Free State. John James defended the Republican side and was to see much more active service in Donegal, including an attack on Free Staters in Lifford Barracks. His home was raided many times by Free State Forces, near the Kelly home in Drumdoit there was a "dug out" and to these quarters John James and his comrades retreated several times. It became known that there was a dug out in the area but so cleverly concealed was it that Free State Forces failed to find it.

The Civil War ended in defeat for Republicans. Many of them were forced to leave the country. Those who remained at home found it hard to make a living. John James Kelly eventually got married and settled to live in Clady. In common with other Republicans he found life difficult on account of his Republican views.

Once again he plunged himself into the work of re-organisation. He became active in the G.A.A., founded a club in Clady and organised many Gaelic activities, including Aerioct in Gallen's field at Bloomfield, to which he brought such people as Madame Maud Gonne McBride, Nora O'Kane, Brian O'Higgins and George Gilmore. This work he combined with his Republican activities, and he continued in his old position as O/C. of the Clady Company. His political views were now very much to the left and he was deeply interested in the works of International Revolutionaries and lectured his son Hugh, as a small boy, on Lenin. John James Kelly could be classed as the James Connolly of Clady.

In 1935 his battalion O/C. Sean McCool was arrested in Belfast, and John James Kelly was then promoted to the position of Battalion O/C. Later he was elected a member of the Executive Council of the Irish Republican Army.

John James Kelly devoted his youthful and manhood years in the service of the Republican Movement. He sacrificed much and suffered many hardships. All of these he endured because of his loyalty to the Republic. He risked his life often and had many narrow escapes, and it was unfortunate that his life at 48 years of age, and the lives of his two comrades should end in such tragic circumstances.

"AR dHEIS DE GO RAIBH A ANAM."

The remains of Comdt.. John James Kelly were interred at the family burying ground in Doneyloop. He was buried with military honours. Peadar O'Flaherty, adjutant General I.R.A. delivered an oration and Seamus McCann of Derry, a former member of a Donegal Flying Column sounded the Last Post. Many old comrades came to pay their last respects and his funeral was one of the biggest in that area.

A memorial in the form of a Celtic Cross is being erected over his grave. This Memorial will be unveiled on Sunday 14th September 1969.

Subscriptions will be gratefully received up to and including 14th September by any of the following :-

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